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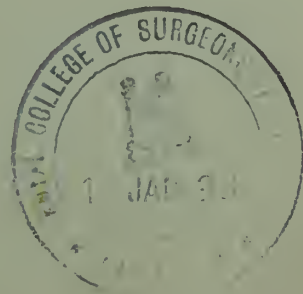
THEOPHRASTUS PARACELSUS

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BY

F. PARKES WEBER, M.D., F.S.A.

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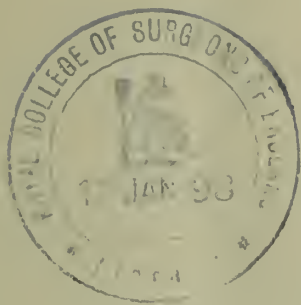


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THEOPHRASTUS PARACELSUS.

By F. PARKES WEBER, M.D., F.S.A.

It is doubtful whether the life and writings of any physician have received so much attention or have excited so much controversy as those of Paracelsus; nor is it difficult to understand the reason. The history of Paracelsus possesses in an unusual degree all those elements of attractiveness which have been so clearly explained by the Bishop of London, in his recent lecture at the Royal Institution, on "Picturesqueness in History". It is this kind of attractiveness probably which induced Robert Browning to choose the life as a theme for one of his best-known works—a work which has contributed in no small degree to the present fame of the Swiss physician.

Paracelsus was a man of action, who lived in a stirring period of history, a period, moreover, well known to general readers of all countries; he appears doubtless in the minds of many, as he does in the fresco of Kaulbach, standing amongst the most famous men of the epoch of the reformation, some of whom he must have seen and known. His impulsiveness

and eccentricity helped rather than hindered him in the acquisition of notoriety, and, though notorious during life, his posthumous celebrity far exceeded his contemporary fame. Alchemists, quacks, and charlatans of all kinds paraded his name for purposes of their own, so that it became almost impossible to distinguish what he really wrote from what was attributed to him and to separate the real facts of his life from the false ones. Hence the various estimations of his character

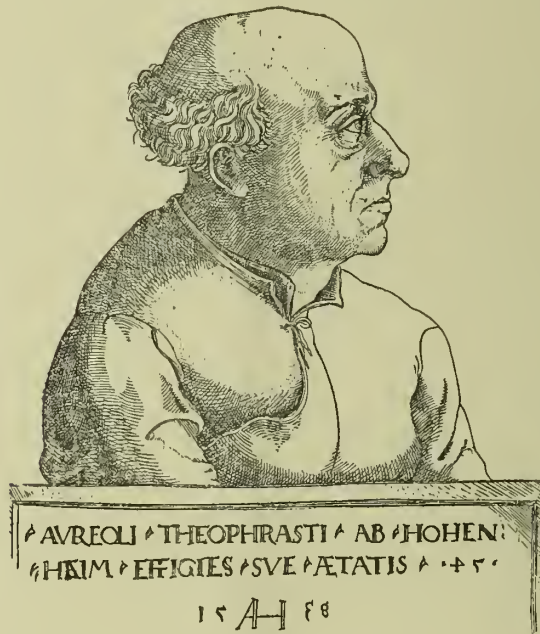


Fig. 1.

are totally contradictory, though the battle waged on this uncertain ground by physicians, story-tellers and antiquaries in their attempts to glorify or damn his memory has at least had one effect—that of making his name still more famous. Amongst his great contemporaries, the learning of Erasmus, the art of Holbein, the humour of Rabelais, the humane outspokenness of Johann Weyer, and the terrible deaths of Etienne Dolet and Michael Servetus have hardly sufficed to make their names more widely known,

The names of Paracelsus in full were Aureolus Philippus Theophrastus Bombast von Hohenheim. Paracelsus was a name he is said to have assumed in boyhood and by this name he became afterwards best known. As to its meaning there has been a good deal of discussion. Some have supposed it to signify that in knowledge he claimed to surpass the Roman physician Celsus, but such a far-fetched meaning could have



Fig. 2.

hardly presented itself to the mind of a boy. Others argue that it is a hybrid classical rendering of Höhener or Höchener, which they suggest was his real name. But Höhener was not his name, and we believe the true explanation is the following simple one. The meaning of the patronymic *von* in German noble names can be supplied in Latin by *a* or *ab* and in Greek by *παρά*. At a time when most German Professors changed their names into the Latin or Greek equivalents, this youthful

philosopher was not content with the ordinary Latin, *Ab Hohenheim*, which appears on his authentic portraits (figs. 1 and 2), but preferred the Greek *παρά* to the Latin *ab*, and then, instead of making his name wholly Greek, like his contemporary Melanchthon, added the Latin *Celsus* (for *Hohenheim*), thus obtaining the doggerel mixture, "*Paracelsus*".

He was born at Einsiedeln in Canton Schwytz in the year 1493. His father Wilhelm Bombast von Hohenheim, a physician in poor circumstances, is supposed to have been the natural son of a German noble of that name. He received his early instruction from his father at Villach in Carinthia; then he studied at the University of Basel, and commenced a life of travel. He passed through various countries, including certainly Germany, Hungary, France and the Netherlands. During this period of his life he visited different mines, especially those belonging to the wealthy Fugger family in Tyrol, and gained all the information he could about metallurgy and chemistry. He doubtless collected what knowledge he could get from the poorer people on the use of popular remedies and local customs in ordinary complaints. In his wanderings he made the acquaintance of alchemists, especially Johann Tritheim—Trithemius—with whom he studied, as well as of charlatans and quacks of all sorts. He said: "I searched after my art, at the risk even of my life, and have not felt ashamed to learn something even from tramps, executioners and barbers" (1).

On his return to Switzerland he set up as a physician in his native country, and in 1527, probably at the instance of the reformer Oekolampadius and the printer Frobenius (a patient of his), was appointed to the chair of medicine at the University of Basel. Here his fame became very great, and it was about this time that Erasmus of Rotterdam sought his advice by letter (2). Here it was also that in ridicule of the dogmatic teaching of his contemporaries, and probably inflamed by their opposition to his innovations, he himself

committed the ridiculous error of publicly burning the works of Avicenna (3), on which much of the dogmatism of his rivals was founded.

In 1528, however, he brought an action for the recovery of a fee against the rich Canon von Lichtenfels, and on account of his quarrel, owing to the judgment being against him, he had to quit Basel and recommence his wanderings. He then resided for a short time at Esslingen, Strassburg, Nürnberg, Augsburg and other towns. About 1541, on the



Fig. 3.

invitation of the Archbishop of Salzburg, he settled in Salzburg, but this proved his last resting place, for he died there in the month of September, 1541, at the age of forty-seven. A monument was afterwards erected to his memory in the Church of St. Sebastian. It has been said that he died from a debauch or in consequence of rough handling received in a quarrel, and some state that his skull bore evidence of injury that could only have been inflicted during life; this, however, is altogether denied by Professor Aberle, who carefully de-

scribes the skull (4). His age at death has been variously given, but all the best evidence is in favour of it being forty-seven. The occurrence of the age forty-five inscribed on a medal (5), bearing the date of his death (1541), may be explained by supposing that the likeness on this medal has been copied from a portrait taken in 1538, when he was only forty-five years old.



Fig. 4.

Of portraits of Paracelsus a very large number exist. These can be divided into a few main groups as Professor Aberle has done, most of the individual portraits being obviously copies or variations of one or the other of a few original prototypes. Of all these portraits scarcely any can claim to be contemporary likenesses. The engraving by Wentzel Hollar, though possibly after Rembrandt, and the

various portraits after Rubens, give us naturally altogether untrustworthy representations, for Hollar lived 1607-1677, Rembrandt lived 1608-1669, and Rubens lived 1577-1640, whereas Paracelsus died in 1541. F. Chauveau engraved a portrait of a totally different type, which he claimed to have copied from a painting done from life by Tintoret. This engraving forms the frontispiece to the Latin edition of the works of Paracelsus published at Geneva in 1658,



Fig. 5.

but little can be said in favour of the authenticity of the likeness when we remember that Tintoret was born in 1512, and that if the portrait really represents Paracelsus it must have been taken long before his death, when Tintoret was still a boy. It is quite probable that the painting which Chauveau took as his original, and which has now disappeared, did not represent Paracelsus at all, but some unknown man, wrongly supposed in Chauveau's time to be the Swiss

physician. There may have been an inscription on the painting which Chauveau copied to the effect that Tintoret painted it from life, but this would not prove that the portrait was one of Paracelsus.

The really authentic portraits of Paracelsus are two engravings (figs. 1 and 2), both the work of an artist, who signed himself by the letters A. H., in monogram, as well as some medals (fig. 3), prints (figs. 4 and 5) and paintings bearing similar likenesses. The two engravings referred to, represent him, one at the age of forty-five, the other at the age of forty-seven, and bear the dates, 1538 and 1541, respectively. It would be very interesting to know who the artist of these engravings was, and it has been suggested that the monogram A. H. stands for Augustin Hirschvogel, a famous draughtsman, engraver, glass-painter, and potter of Nürnberg, but this is quite uncertain. The only fact known of the engraver of these portraits is that, whoever he was, he was probably about that time at Salzburg, for the same monogram appears on an engraving of Dr. Johannes Fabricius of Salzburg, made in 1540.

In both these portraits of Paracelsus we have the representation of a man who looks somewhat prematurely old for the age stated in the accompanying inscriptions. He has a large head with a broad, moderately high forehead, and considerable development of the occipital region. The crown is bald, and there is no hair on the face; bushy rather dishevelled locks cover the lower part of the sides and back of the head. The nose and mouth are large, the features somewhat haggard, and the whole expression thoughtful, but rather coarse. The face is of a kind which one might almost expect to see on an enthusiast of the present day, haranguing the mob in some public place on his own ideas of religion and the fundamental principles of the universe. Paracelsus is dressed in a loose fitting gown, and in the 1540 portrait (fig. 2) has an amulet suspended from the neck, and he grasps in both hands the

enormous handle of his famous sword, to which we must refer later on.

The character of Paracelsus has been most differently represented. On the one hand he is described as the type of charlatans, the prince of mystics, the frenzied drunkard, the inspired of Satan; on the other hand he is represented as the indefatigable searcher after truth, whose excessive enthusiasm may have been annoying to others and may have induced them to say that he was drunk or frenzied, whose hatred of the dogmatism of the time led him to undervalue his rivals and the books on which their teaching depended, whose practical successes, as much as his want of tact, raised up for him jealousy and enmity on all sides. He has even been called the "Luther of Medicine".

It is not only the contradictory elements in it which makes his real character so hard to ascertain, but still more so the great difficulty there is to distinguish what he really did from all the tales and posthumous gossip about him; to separate what he really wrote from all the writings which have been fathered upon him. Alchemists, quacks, mystics, Rosicrucians, etc., used his name, as one to conjure by, and doctrines which have been attributed, to him have sometimes originated, or at least been developed, in the fanciful brains of these self-styled followers. When many thought that the way to find out the panacea and the philosopher's stone was by diligently studying the works of Paracelsus, it is not surprising that for many years following his death, fresh "posthumous" works of doubtful authenticity should have continued to appear—probably to the great profit of the publishers and real authors—each one more mystic or more unintelligible than the last. In the investigation of these questions much has been gained by the criticisms and catalogues of Marx (6), Haeser (7), Mook (8), J. Ferguson (9), Sudhoff (10), and others.

We will firstly discuss shortly some special accusations

and other questions concerning him, and then proceed to the main points in his work and character.

If the present evidence as to drunkenness, frenzied ravings, and communion with evil spirits be examined, the greater part of it may be traced back to Oporinus. Johannes Oporinus (Herbst) of Basel, born in 1507, was for two years (about 1528) the *famulus* or *amanuensis* of Paracelsus. In 1533 he was made Professor of Latin at the University of Basel and was Professor of Greek there from 1537 to 1539. Afterwards he became the most celebrated printer of his time in Germany and Switzerland, and died in 1568. In the biographical record of Oporinus by Jociscus (11) published at Strassburg in 1569 we have the following passage: "Moreover Theophrastus, intoxicated with wine, was wont in the night to attack apparitions with his unsheathed sword for almost half an hour at a time, thus causing great fright and danger to Oporinus, who, sleeping in the same room, used to hide himself in bed. Then he would oblige Oporinus to write from dictation and spoke so quickly that Oporinus often declared he believed the words were inspired by demons." Well! Oporinus was about twenty-one years old then, and doubtless enjoyed his sleep. He cannot have liked being aroused in the middle of the night, especially to write rapidly from dictation in an artificial light; his annoyance as Melchior Adami suggests (12) may possibly have led him to exaggerate the facts and call the restless enthusiasm of Paracelsus drunkenness. It is said that he afterwards regretted his accusations.

Erastus (13) tells a similar story, but it may be questioned whether much weight ought to be attached to his evidence, even if it were first-hand, and this it is not. Thomas Erastus (Liebler or Lieber) was probably the bitterest of the writers against Paracelsus. He was born about 1523, became Professor of Medicine at Heidelberg, and afterwards Professor of Ethics at Basel, where he died in 1583. He founded by a book on excommunication the religious doctrines called after

him, Erastianism. Besides his attacks on the writing of Paracelsus, he distinguished himself, when Professor of Medicine at Heidelberg, by writing some dialogues directed against Johann Weyer (1515-1588), the enlightened physician to the Duke of Cleves. Weyer should always be remembered on account of his moral courage in that bigoted age, which caused him to speak out boldly against the practice of burning poor weak-minded old women and hysterical persons as witches and sorcerers. Paracelsus is therefore in good company when attacked by Erastus.

The latter also suggested that Paracelsus was a eunuch and that he therefore avoided women. The story of the castration of Paracelsus during childhood by the attack of a hog may be true, but sounds like an attempt at mean ridicule, just as the similar story about Boileau does, which rests on very slight foundation.

Erastus also, quoting Oporinus, alludes to the curious sword represented on the portraits. On the contemporary portraits (fig. 2) of the year 1540, Paracelsus is represented holding the handle of a very large sword. It looks as if it might have been a two-handed sword, such as those used by executioners, and Paracelsus himself affirmed that it was a sword of this kind (14). It is therefore not to be wondered at that all manner of stories grew up after the death of Paracelsus concerning his peculiar sword. On the portrait (fig. 4) published with a posthumous work of his (15) in 1568, the pommel of the sword has the word AZOTH inscribed on it. Melchior Adami (16) says: "Some think that what he kept in the handle of his sword, that which he himself called Azoth, was a most potent medicine or the philosopher's stone".

This passage throws considerable light on the subject. Paracelsus did perhaps say there was "Azoth" in the handle of his sword, whatever he meant by the word. The Rosicrucians of the seventeenth century (amongst whom were

the Englishmen, Robert Fludd and William Maxwell) especially developed the idea of Azoth and the "quintessence" which it contained. The latter was afterwards vaguely enough identified with mineral and "animal magnetism," when these subjects came to the front.

At any rate, much of the talk about the sword handle and "Azoth" originated after the death of Paracelsus. Perhaps, after all, the word occurs in connection with his sword only because Paracelsus named the sword after his (ideal rather than actual) medicine, Azoth.

In examining the character of Paracelsus and in estimating the position which he occupies in the history of medicine, one is forced to an opinion which others have already maintained, namely, that the truth lies somewhere between the assertions of his detractors and the ideal representation of those who find everything good in him.

He certainly took a great share in the introduction of mercury, antimony, arsenic and iron into medical treatment. He also knew of the results of chronic poisoning by mercury, arsenic, etc., and had had the opportunity of personally observing such symptoms in the case of metallurgists connected with the mines he visited. He treated Syphilis, "die Frantzosen," as he called it, with mercury. What a terrible scourge this disease was in those days we may gather from his own words: "Dieweil ich begreiff alle die Wundkrankheiten, wie sie in die Frantzosen verwandelt werden, welche die grösste Krankheit der gantzen Welt ist, da kein ärgere nie erfunden, die Niemandt schonet, und die mehresten Häupter am Mehrsten angreiffet" (17).

He understood the use of opium, although what he called "laudanum" was probably quite different to the tincture of opium, now called by that name (18).

The "chemical doctors" ("spagyric" doctors) were attacked and repressed long after the death of Paracelsus. Antimony, opium and laudanum were still prohibited in 1640

by the faculty of Paris, who called those doctors who made use of them, such as the philanthropic Theophrastus Renaudot, empirics. Just as Theophrastus Paracelsus in the sixteenth century was held up to personal ridicule and called "Kakophrastus" (19), so in the seventeenth century Theophrastus Renaudot was likewise called Kakophrastus, and, on account of his being marked by smallpox, was compared by the Paris physician, Guy Patin, to a "cheese eaten by mites" (20)—an insult which the Parisians washed out in 1894 by erecting a monument to his memory in Paris.

Paracelsus investigated the effects of natural mineral waters and thermal treatment at Pfaefers and other baths. The first medical account of Pfaefers (21) was written in 1535 by Paracelsus, and dedicated by him to Johann Russinger, Abbot of Pfaefers. To give an idea of the practical sense of his views on this subject we will borrow the following epitome from Dr. J. Macpherson (22). After explaining that a bath physician should be thoroughly acquainted with his profession, and that the virtues of wells are best tested by the cures they produce, for daily experience is worth more than the counsel of books, he says that the physician should regulate the diet of his patient according to the nature of his malady, and that a physician in sending a patient to a watering-place should judge and discriminate in what condition a patient is more or less fitted for a course of waters, and whether it is a fitting time to send him. No certain and precise number of baths could be fixed on.

According to Professor Puschmann (23) Paracelsus observed endemic cretinism in some Alpine regions. He recommended alkaline medicines in gout and the stone. He made use of "milk of sulphur" in medicine, and employed tincture of galls as a test for iron in mineral waters.

Crocq (24) gives Paracelsus the first place in the history of Hypnotism, and sees in the *Practica*, printed in 1529, the first scientific theory of "animal magnetism," as afterwards set forth by Mesmer.

His theories, however, on St. Vitus's dance (*i.e.*, the various affections formerly known under that term) seem now-a-days hardly less grotesque than the dance itself, if indeed he really wrote what has been attributed to him on this subject.

Considering the time in which he lived it is noteworthy that Paracelsus duly recognised the *vis medicatrix naturæ*, the tendency to spontaneous recovery from disease, and the natural process by which wounds heal. Medicine was to him an ally aiding the patient to drive out disease. In his view of disease as something foreign to the organism, which entered in to fight with it, he dimly foreshadowed the *contagium vivum* theory of disease. This was, however, first actually enunciated by the Jesuit Kircher (25), when in 1659 he wrote: "The propagators of the plague are little worms, so small, fine and delicate that they cannot be recognised by the senses".

If Paracelsus had rested at the introduction of useful drugs and the development of his practical views of medicine, and had simply upheld reliance on personal observations as well as on book learning, he would probably have been nearly as much opposed during his lifetime; though now-a-days his name would have been less notorious, but his memory more cherished. He did not content himself with these practical objects, but with his necessary limited, though growing, knowledge, he aimed at nothing less than the development of some scheme of philosophy which would explain the whole working of the universe. Naturally, when he had welded into his system all he had learned or heard on medicine, chemistry, astronomy, religion and philosophy, the doctrines which he thus obtained were often anything but satisfactory, and were rendered still more wild and absurd by his successors, whose unintelligible jargon was intended to simulate depth of thought.

Amongst his contemporaries he must have been deficient

in classical learning, and to this defect in scholarship he added that of practising to the extreme the principles of his rather arrogant motto, "Alterius non sit, qui suus esse potest". Thus we hear of him burning the standard works of Avicenna, and are puzzled in reading his own writings by the number of fanciful terms he often needlessly invented instead of employing those already in use. The motto on his 1540 portrait (fig. 2), "Omne donum perfectum a deo, imperfectum a diabolo," recalls the religious doctrines which he mixed up with his scientific and philosophic theories.

There can be no doubt that his aims were lofty and pure, and that in the practice and practical views of medicine he introduced, or helped to introduce, many improvements. He was, however, as Puschmann calls him, a "Faust-like" character, who could not sufficiently resist immediate influences and contemporary difficulties to realise his noble aspirations.

REFERENCES.

- (1) This passage we have not found ourselves, but it is quoted by Dr. M. B. Lessing in his *Paracelsus, sein Leben und Denken*, p. 59, Berlin, 1839.
- (2) The Letter and Reply are printed amongst the collected works of Paracelsus.
- (3) On this question compare Professor C. Aberle's *Grabdenkmal, Schädel und Abbildungen des Theophrastus Paracelsus*, p. 521, Salzburg, 1891.
- (4) Aberle, *op. cit.*, p. 518.
- (5) C. L. Duisburg's edition of C. A. Rudolphi's *Recentioris Aevi numismata vivorum de rebus medicis et physicis meritorum*, p. 99, Danzig, 1862.
- (6) K. F. H. Marx, *Zur Würdigung des Theophrastus von Hohenheim*, Goettingen, 1840-1841.
- (7) H. Haeser, *Lehrbuch der Geschichte der Medicin*. Third edition.
- (8) Friedrich Mook, *Theophrastus Paracelsus, eine kritische Studie*, Würzburg, 1874.
- (9) Professor John Ferguson, *Bibliographia Paracelsica*. Privately printed at Glasgow, 1877-1893.

- (10) Karl Sudhoff, *Versuch einer Kritik der Echtheit der Paracelsisehen Schriften*, Berlin, 1894.
- (11) Andreas Jociscus, *Oratio de ortu, vita, et obitu Joannis Oporini Basiliensis*, p. 9, Argentorati, 1569.
- (12) Melchior Adami, *Vitae Germanorum Medicorum*, p. 35, Haidelbergae, 1620.
- (13) Thomas Erastus, *Disputationum de medicinâ norâ Philippi Paracelsi pars prima*, pp. 236, 237, Basileae (1572?).
- (14) Erastus, *op. cit.*, p. 239, "quem carnificis cujusdem fuisse jactabat".
- (15) "De urinarum ac pulsuum judiciis Theophrasti Paracelsi heremitae [*i.e.*, of Einsiedeln, where he was born] utriusque medicinae doctoris celeberrimi libellus." Published at Cologne, 1568.
- (16) Melchior Adami, *loc. cit.*
- (17) Preface to the *Paragranum*. J. Huser's German edition of his collected works, published at Basel in ten volumes, vol. ii., p. 15, 1589 *et seq.*
- (18) See Aberle, *op. cit.*, p. 332.
- (19) See introduction to the *Paragranum*.
- (20) G. Gilles de la Tourette, *Théophraste Renaudot*, Paris, 1884.
- (21) *Von dem Bad Pfeffers*.
- (22) *The Baths and Wells of Europe*, pp. 23, 24, London, 1869.
- (23) Theod. Puschmann, *Geschichte des Medicinischen Unterrichts*, p. 259, Leipzig, 1889.
- (24) Dr. Crocq fils, *L'Hypnotisme Scientifique*, pp. 2, 10, Paris, 1856.
- (25) Athanasius Kircher, *Scrutinium physico-medicum contagiosae luis quae dicitur Pestis*, 1659. Kircher's name is preserved by the Museum Kircherianum, which he founded at Rome.

Illustrations kindly lent by the Editors of the "Numismatic Chronicle".

Figure 1 is a reduced copy of the engraving of 1538, from Aberle, *op. cit.*, Plate Va.

Figure 2 is a reduced copy of the engraving of 1540 from the example in the British Museum.

Figure 3 is from a unique medallion, in the collection of Dr. F. P. Weber, described in the *Numismatic Chronicle*, vol. xiii., p. 60.

Figure 4 is taken from the portrait in the work *De Urinarum* (*op. cit.*), published in 1568.

Figure 5 is from a portrait in the book of Erastus (*op. cit.*), published about 1572.